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ABSTRACT

The national dropout rate has remained at about 20% for the last decade. However, disparities in the definition of dropouts and in data collection have caused national dropout figures to vary. Researchers agree that students from areas of large minority populations with fewer English-speaking students, and those living in poverty are at risk of dropping out. The reason most often cited for dropping out is a general dislike of school. Dropping out is often the beginning of problems for the individual and society. Many dropouts will remain unemployed, others will take low paying jobs. Dropout prevention programs attempt to reduce the number of students leaving school by improving attendance and academics. More recently, alternative schools have added a humanistic approach to dropout programs. Successful programs have been found to separate potential dropouts from other students, stress the immediate and practical, offer opportunities for paid employment, and maintain low student-teacher ratios. Adolescence has been found to be a critical stage for identifying potential dropouts and for reversing negative attitudinal and behavior trends. Parents' lack of support for education is related to their children's negative attitudes toward school. In elementary school, home-school communication can insure parents develop positive attitudes toward education. Junior high school is the critical period for the identification of potential school dropouts and various out-of-school interventions, such as community support and civic involvement, should be used. In senior high school, intervention programs should concentrate on keeping the students in school until they have reached their maximum educational potential and/or have acquired adequate life skills. (ABL)

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SCHOOL DROPOUTS - WHY DOES THE PROBLEM PREVAIL?

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BACKGROUND

The problem of school dropouts is nothing new to education. It has been a problem since the nineteenth century when school attendance became compulsory.

During the 1900s 90 percent of the male population did not graduate. By 1920 the percentage was reduced to 80, but it was not until the 1950s before the dropout rate fell below 50 percent (Wehlage and Rutter, 1986). Approximately 80 percent of the students who enrolled in school during the late 1960s and early 1970s graduated with their class (Kaplan and Luck, 1977).

For the past decade the national dropout rate has remained relatively constant at approximately 20 percent (Digest of Education Statistics, 1985).

Definition and Data Collection

It is surprising that no standardized research definition of the term "dropout" exists, nor has a standardized method of collecting data been developed, although educators have expressed concern regarding dropouts for over a century.

The two major sources of dropout data, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics and Census and the National Center for Educational Statistics (N.C.E.S.), use different definitions to identify the school dropout.

The United States Census Bureau (1986) defines a dropout as any person who has not graduated and who is not currently enrolled in regular school. It should be noted that Census Bureau data

samples are reported in percentages as compared to total populations of similar age groups.

N.C.E.S. (1984) uses a comparison of the number of high school graduates with the number of students enrolled as freshman four years previous to identify the school dropout.

The term dropout has come to incorporate a variety of early school leavers. Morrow (1986) suggests that in the absence of standardized criteria for defining the "dropout," the term may become manipulatory and subjective depending on one's purpose or goal. In addition, the lack of a standardized method of collecting data on dropout rates has created variations which are not only confusing but misleading, especially when one is not familiar with the specific definitions used to identify the dropout and the data collection methodology.

Disparities in definition and data collection continue to occur between individual cities and states. For example, New York defines dropouts to be any ninth through twelfth grader no longer enrolled in school, including special education students. Los Angeles' data collection includes only senior high school students in grades ten through twelve and does not use the term dropout but rather refers to "early school leavers." Boston classifies a dropout as any student over age sixteen who leaves school regardless of grade (Hammack, 1986).

The discrepancies in definitions and data collection concerning dropout rates can cause national dropout figures to vary as much as 14 percent (Education U.S.A., 1986).

These inconsistencies are of special importance to the educator and psychologist when attempting to compare national and/or local district data with other student populations. The greater the difference in definition and data collection between groups, the greater the danger of generalizing to the other populations.

Who Drops Out?

Although inconsistencies are evident in both the definition and the data collection process, researchers do agree that particular groups of students are at greater risk of dropping out than others.

The highest dropout rates are found in areas where there are large minority populations and fewer English-speaking students. Research shows that the dropout rate for Native Americans living in urban settings may be as high as 85 percent, while the Puerto Rican dropout rate varies between 70 and 80 percent. The black dropout rate surpasses the white dropout rate by 40 percent, with the Hispanic dropout rate 50 percent higher than the white dropout rate. The southeastern and western states have the highest dropout rates in comparison to the midwestern states (Education U.S.A., 1986).

The Education Commission of the State's Business Advisory Commission (1985) links dropout rates to a general increase in youth living in poverty. Twenty-two percent of American children live in households with incomes below the poverty level and one-third to one-half of these children are from minorities. In

comparison, 22 percent of the nation's dropouts come from low-income families, while 7 percent come from high-income families.

Reasons for Dropping Out

Current research shows that students leave school for a variety of reasons. The most common reason given is the student's "dislike of school." The other reasons can be seen as educational, economic, or family related and include:

(1) learning difficulties - low grades;

(2) pregnancy - marriage;

(3) economic need - finding a job;

(4) history of failure in school;

(5) pushed out - raised standards could not be met;

(6) burned out - trying too hard to succeed;

(7) poor relationships with teachers and peers;

(8) poor home support for education; and

(9) lack of a supportive environment

(Digest of Education Statistics, 1985).

Beck and Muia (1980) and California's Open Road Research Project (Education U.S.A., 1986) suggests there are other "unalterable circumstances" such as language, culture, and race which also contribute to the dropout problem. These differences place the students from low socioeconomic groups at a disadvantage when the student is not able to conform to the middle class standards associated with the educational system. The result will often create feelings of low self-worth, insecurity, and promote failure which may reinforce

within the student a feeling of academic incompetence. Under these circumstances, dropping out alleviates frustration and unhappiness and temporarily allows the student to regain the cultural values and personal identity that have been compromised by education.

Social and Economic Consequences of Dropping Out

Dropping out often signals the beginning of added problems for the individual and for society. A total of 21 percent of all dropouts remain unemployed (Conditions of Education, 1984). Of those dropouts who are employed, 39 percent in 1983 and 47 percent in 1984 worked as laborers, operators or fabricators; 23 percent do precision production, craft and repair work, while 22 percent are in service jobs that include private households. Medium income for dropouts in 1983 was $13,615, which was approximately $4,000 above the poverty level (Digest of Educational Statistics - DES, 1984).

The employment patterns of dropouts cost individual states and the federal government billions of dollars in lost revenues from welfare, unemployment compensation and reduced tax revenues. It has been estimated that lost revenues can total $200,000 per dropout (Chatterall, 1985).

DES (1984) reports a large percentage of dropouts end up in state funded juvenile correctional facilities. Over 48,000 youths between the ages of 15 and 19 are incarcerated. The cost to house each individual in a state correctional facility can

amount to $30,000 per year, as is the case in the District of Columbia. In contrast, the allotment for each student who remains in school is just $4,000 per year.

Of the 270,000 teenage pregnancies in 1983, approximately one-half are on welfare at a cost to states and the federal government of over 16 billion dollars.

The total cost to United States citizens for dropout-related expenses for social programs and economic loss has reached 75 billion dollars (Digest of Education Statistics, 1985).

Dropout Programs

Kaplan and Luck (1977) reviewed a variety of national dropout prevention programs which were initiated in the 1950s through the 1970s. They included, among others, the New York City Work Experience Program which began in 1955, Baltimore's KAPS (Keeping All Pupils In School) program initiated in 1969, and St. Louis' Project Stay originated in 1970.

The major goal of these prevention programs was to reduce the number of students leaving school by improving attendance and academics - the major factors which were known to attribute to the dropout phenomenon.

To accomplish this goal these prevention programs added the following educational components. They increased attendance personnel, increased parent contact, incorporated remedial and vocational components into the curriculum, improved communication with the community, provided guidance and counseling services and established re-entry programs for those students who had already withdrawn.

In spite of these attempts to reduce the rate of high school dropouts, success was minimal and there were no significant, lasting results reported. According to Kaplan and Luck the reason for their lack of success was that many of the programs were designed as crash programs and did not address the underlying causes which influence the students to drop out.

Today, as well as a decade ago, alternative schools continue to be in vogue. They incorporate many of the previously mentioned program components while adding a humanistic approach to education (Abramson, 1975; Johnson, 1975). Although alternate schools have achieved some success in keeping a certain segment of the student population in school, they continue to experience some major drawbacks.

Most alternate programs are designed to remove the students from the regular classroom program and place them in a non-traditional setting which may be artificial, thereby hindering appropriate problem-solving behavior necessary for adult life. Secondly, they are usually initiated at the high school level - too late for many dropouts. Lastly, they do not address cause; therefore, alternative school enrollments continue to increase as a growing number of students face failure and discouragement within the school environment.

Most school systems today have instituted some form of alternative dropout prevention programs with varying degrees of success. Hamilton (1986) noted that the majority of successful programs incorporate four components:

(1) they separate potential dropouts from other students;

(2) they have a vocational education component;

(3) they offer out-of-classroom learning opportunities with the possibility of paid employment; and

(4) they maintain low student-teacher ratios and have strong and active counseling components.

Hodgkinson (1985) concurred with Hamilton's findings and added that:

(1) personal attention is addressed to student needs;

(2) an emphasis is placed on the "immediate and practical";

(3) rewards are given for student achievement;

(4) emphasis is on basic skill instruction; and

(5) follow-up is maintained after a student leaves school.

Many school systems have begun to focus on recruiting dropouts back to school and developing programs to meet their needs. These systems are responding to the many social and economic consequences for both the dropout and society.

Project 70001 is one successful program established to meet the needs of dropouts. The program offers job training and work placement, counseling, alternative education and peer support. It is funded by the Department of Labor and is operational in 30 cities, serving the needs of dropouts between the ages of 16 to 21. The goal of Project 70001 is to provide dropouts with skills which will enable them to meet entry-level employment requirements (Beck and Muia, 1980).

In Jacksonville, Florida, the Duval County Public Schools have

established another program to encourage dropouts to return to school. Vocational specialists use comprehensive methods to identify dropouts and then offer them a vocational program. Dropouts learn the skills needed for an entry-level position and are awarded a vocational certificate rather than a diploma. Upon completion of the training program, the student may enter the school's industrial/cooperative education program and be placed in a work experience situation (Education U.S.A., 1986).

When one considers the enormous loss of revenue to state and federal governments for each dropout, the efforts taken to help dropouts re-establish themselves in an educational and/or vocational program seem extremely cost effective.

DEVELOPMENT

It is increasingly obvious that something is causing students to become inefficient learners and failure-oriented pupils. Unfortunately, educators appear content coping with the negative behavioral symptoms rather than addressing the underlying causes which prompt the behavior.

It is generally agreed that dropping out of school is not an isolated event, but a chronic development process. Ruby and Law (1982) designed a developmental profile which they found to be typical of the dropout pattern.

[Insert Graphs 1 and 2]

Note that the development is normal until grade six and meets educational expectations in regard to academic growth. The

development to this point appears to substantiate previous findings by Howard and Anderson (1978) who maintain that the majority of dropouts have the ability to succeed in school as well as college.

After grade six the student exhibits a change in behavior. Grade point average and standardized test scores decrease and days out increase. Thus emerges the negative behavior patterns which have come to be characteristic of the dropout (Ekstrom et al., 1986). Indications are that the triggering mechanism for this change in behavior is rooted in the development of student attitudes toward school, which in turn affects behavior. Attitude has long been recognized as a precursor to behavior and the covert force which directs it (Kelman, 1974; Klausmeier and Ripple, 1971).

According to Gagne (1977) attitudes are learned through a series of experiences with other individuals such as parents and friends. The most influential learning situations are those that involve human modeling, a process by which an individual copies the behavior of an admired person and not only acquires their behavior patterns, but the attitudes as well. Parents are usually the models for children and, therefore, play a critical role in developing their child's attitude toward school.

Reportedly, the majority of dropouts come from homes where parents do not support, or encourage, their children to succeed in school. Often many of the parents have had little formal education themselves (Gadwa and Griggs, 1985). Regardless of

the reasons for their parents' lack of support, it is conceivable that dropouts have assimilated their negative attitudes and behavior patterns from their parents.

The impact of negative attitudes toward education are shown to attribute to poor academic performance and frequency of behavior problems (Myrick and Dixon, 1985). Often negative attitudes of children remain covert and do not emerge in behavior until adolescence - a time in life when attitudes are susceptible to change and chidren begin to question and challenge authority.

Unfortunately, education usually responds to challenged authority by students with some form of punishment. The punishment not only serves as an additional negative learning experience but solidifies an already existing negative attitude and hastens the student's withdrawal from school.

The knowledge that parental attitudes are critical in establishing student attitudes toward school and behavior in school presupposes its inclusion in any intervention program. In addition, adolescence should be considered the critical stage for identification of potential dropouts and for reversing negative attitudinal and behavioral trends.

ALTERNATIVE ACTIONS

In a majority of cases, dropping out of school results from lack of interest and from academic failure which develops from negative attitudes. Both reasons do not develop spontaneously

but grow over a period of time from conditions and educational practices. One consistent finding in dropout research is that alternative actions and intervention strategies are best designed as preventative measures. The longer the potential dropout remains unidentified, the less effective will be the intervention. The school psychologist's actions will be determined by the timeliness of the identification of the potential school dropout.

Although the majority of potential school dropouts are not readily identified in elementary school because of the lack of overt negative behavior, teachers should be aware of the risk factors particular to their student population so they may employ prevention practices. This involves the knowledge that large urban and small rural populations have a greater percentage of dropouts than suburban populations, the lower the socioeconomic status the greater the dropout risk and that minority populations have a greater percentage of dropouts than non-minority populations (Beck and Muia, 1980).

If high-risk factors are evident in an elementary school population, then school personnel will best serve the potential dropout by employing sound educational practices which emphasize the teaching of basic skills. Positive student attitudes toward school can be developed through presenting a humanistic approach to learning and discipline. Also vital in the elementary school is extensive home-school communication to insure that parents develop positive attitudes toward education and become appropriate models for their children.

Interventions in Elementary School

1. Reduce failure by establishing remedial programs to enhance academic skill development and by offering afterschool supervised study and homework programs.

2. Aid student role modeling through hiring practices which reflect the culture of the student population.

3. Improve student self image by offering programs to provide success in non-academic areas.

Elementary - Out-of-School Interventions

1. Offer parent training programs to address the critical nature of parental support in relation to their children's success in school.

2. Sponsor community awareness forums to address the long-range effects of the dropout problem, such as crime, unemployment and welfare costs.

3. Enhance parent attitude toward education by providing services so parents can continue their education and improve employment opportunities.

4. Establish a dialogue with community government officials to enhance awareness of risk factors that can be addressed politically - employment, poverty, adult educational opportunities.

Junior High School

Junior high school is a critical period for the identification of the potential school dropout because previously established negative attitudes begin to be reflected in overt negative

behaviors which are easily recognizable.

Profiling a student's performance from elementary school through junior high school may provide educators with a method of identifying a large segment of potential dropouts.

The critical junior high school period coincides with adolescence - a time when models shift from parents to peers and students seek independence and recognition. While the adolescent strives for independence, reinforcement from parents and established adult models become less effective in shaping overt behavior. The gap created by the search for independence is closed by the increasing support derived from peers which fulfills the adolescent need for recognition. Unfortunately, members of adolescent peer groups often recognize and reinforce inappropriate behavior and ignore appropriate performance.

During adolescence alternative actions must address the social and emotional needs of this age group. Positive peer pressure, group counseling and "approachable" staff are ingredients for successful intervention.

Interventions in Junior High School

1. Establish teacher awareness programs to identify and refer to the psychologist students who possess characteristics associated with the potential school dropout.

2. Provide in-service training programs for teacher/administrators which focus on non-traditional punishment strategies for high-risk students, and encourage the utilization of techniques in which the teachers/administrators are perceived

as approachable.

3. Make available counseling services to identified students.

a. Provide individual counseling to help students establish and maintain long-range goals.

b. Provide peer group counseling to accommodate shifts in role models from authority figures to peers.

4. Provide academic support to reduce failure and retention.

5. Develop supportive programs to reverse the negative trends of increased absenteeism, declining grades and poor classroom behavior.

Junior High School - Out-of-School Interventions

1. Foster parent awareness of potential dropouts by sharing profiles of high-risk students with parents.

2. Enlist community support - job training, speaker's bureau and career awareness programs - to provide students with a connection between education and employment opportunities.

3. Encourage community and civic involvement by establishing volunteer work and apprenticeship programs for potential school dropouts and grant academic credit for work experience and community service.

Senior High School

High school students who are identified as potential dropouts generally have reached the age of decision - "sixteen."

Therefore, intervention programs should concentrate on keeping the students in school until they have reached their maximum educational potential and/or have acquired the life skills necessary to become productive members of society. Alternate schools are an approach which have been shown to be successful in accomplishing this task. They address not only academics but also those social and behavioral characteristics which influence a student's performance.

Interventions in High School

1. Establish alternative programs for students who continue to possess characteristics of the school dropout.

2. Provide a general career educational program which has a work/study component and a vocational education curriculum.

3. Provide individual counseling opportunities that address specific areas that may increase one's chances of becoming a dropout, such as substance abuse and teen pregnancy.

High School - Out-of-School Alternatives

1. Offer parent training programs to enhance effective parenting skills and improve home-school communication.

2. Contact community/civic leaders to establish work/study placements.

3. Contact agencies/individuals who are trained to provide intervention programs for specific problems such as substance abuse.

4. Establish programs to address needs of students who

have dropped out of school, such as evening school programs and graduate equivalency programs. Schools should, whenever possible, arrange an exit interview with the dropout to explain existing educational options.

INTEGRATED SUMMARY

Past and present research data on dropout rates suggests that efforts to reduce the dropout dilemma have resulted in minimal progress. If change is to occur, it must begin with a concentrated effort on the part of educators, community leaders and parents.

The social and economic impact that dropouts have on society is too great to be ignored. Dropouts can no longer be considered solely the problem and responsibility of education.

It is essential that a standardized definition of the term "dropout" be established so that efforts are consistent and data can be shared.

Intervention programs must expand their focus from merely keeping students in school to including prevention. Educators have long reacted to the immediate problems resulting from the negative attitudinal and behavioral symptoms of the potential dropout. Justifiably, behavior is an integral part of the educational process and a necessary ingredient for classroom management. However, this approach does not address the causes which encourage the development of negative attitudes and behaviors.

In the absence of a prevention component the dropout rates will continue to increase as a growing number of students face discouragement and failure in school.

The disproportionately large number of dropouts within minority and low-socioeconomic groups substantiates the notion that students will most likely submit to a preponderance of environmental risk factors rather than overcome them. Consequently, program effectiveness will increase in proportion to their sensitivity to risk factors that are outside academia but influence education.

Recognizing that parental attitude is a critical element in the development of student attitude and behavior toward school, the psychologist should be encouraged to step beyond the classroom and into the home. It is at this level where the psychologist can have the greatest impact on changing the course of this historical problem.

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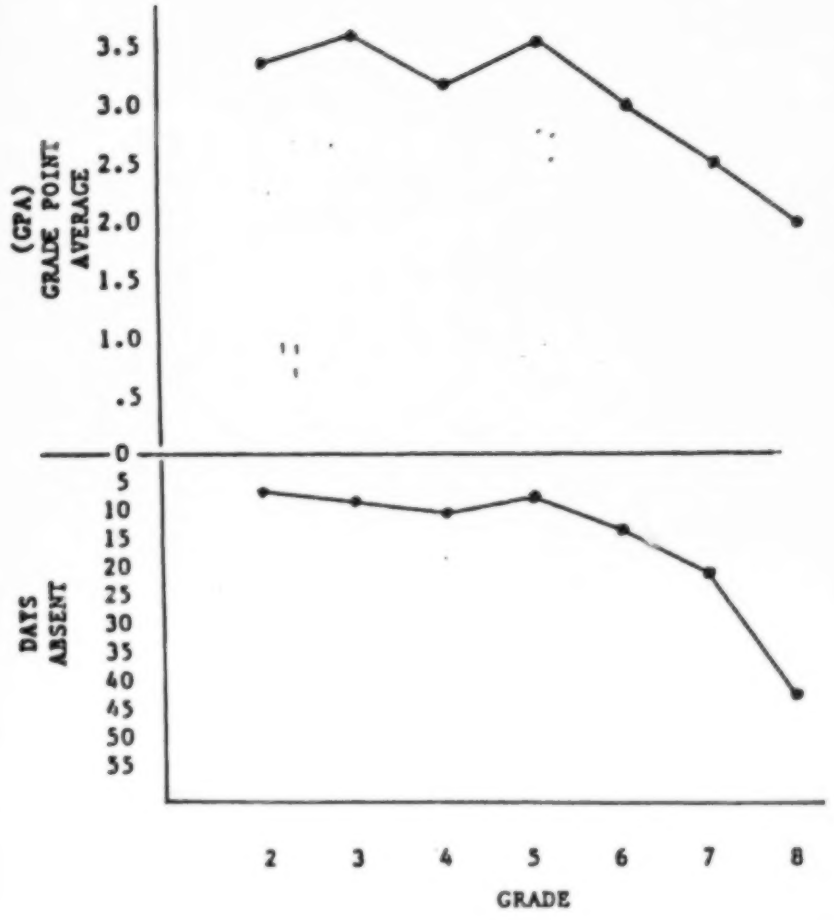
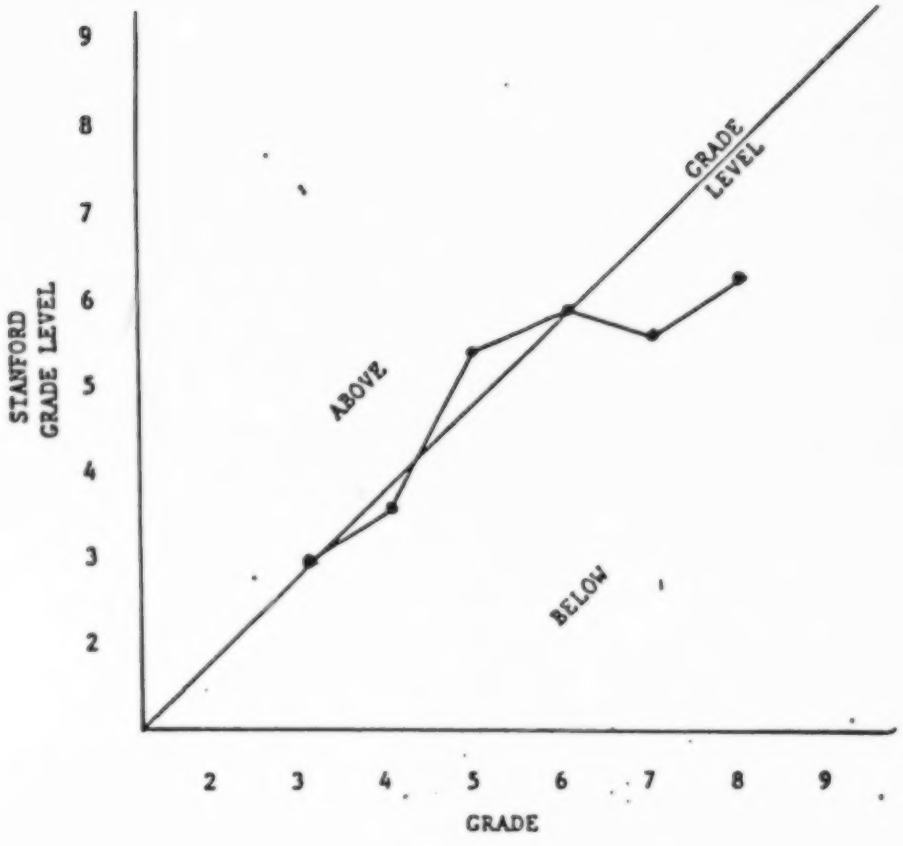
PROFILE

GRAPH 1



GRAPH 2



GRAPHS 1 AND 2

These Graphs profile a single student on G.P.A., days absent and achievement thru 8th grade. Note the decline in G.P.A. and achievements and the increase in days absent with the advent of Junior High.